

Lines of communication

Tips for getting around by modem

by Emilia DuBicki

According to LINK Resources, a New York-based market-research and consulting firm specializing in electronic services, 22.8 million American households (that's about one out of every four homes) are equipped with at least one personal computer. Of those households, 25 percent also own a modem, the PC owner's contact with an ever-growing world of service and entertainment — which might have seemed unimaginable to the average consumer just a few years ago.

Indeed, as the number of computers in homes increases in the United States and beyond, on-line data-bank services are flourishing. But it's no longer just the seasoned hacker who's discussing on-line computer networks — everyone from housewives to high-school kids is talking about logging on and being on-line. Consumer-oriented services are fast becoming a staple for casual computer users. Prodigy, the much-hyped joint creation of Sears and IBM, increased its household membership from 30,000 in December 1988 to over 200,000 by last Christmas. Personal finance, shopping, games, mail, the latest news, and much more are at your fingertips; all you need besides a computer are a modem, a paid-up phone bill, and the appropriate telecommunications software. So equipped, you have only to choose a service and log on (what you do when you dial the system's number) to find yourself on-line, face-to-screen, ready to connect with the external world from the comfort of your home. What follows is a breakdown of what's out there, waiting at the end of your telephone line.

Games people play

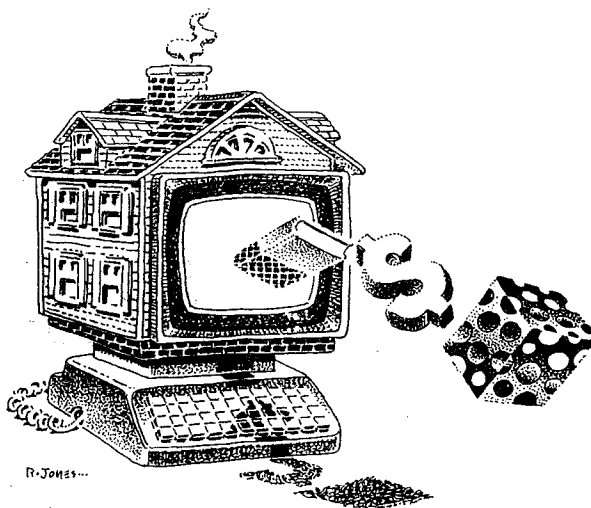
A feature offered by many services is the chance to play games — alone or with someone you've never met. Castle Quest and BlackDragon are among the games offered by both CompuServe and GENie. Delphi has an Entertainment and Games menu that includes Dungeon Quest. Prodigy offers, among others, CEO, a business-simulation game, and the popular Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego? In addition, the service stages daily and weekly drawings for prizes such as tickets to the World Series and Super Bowl.

Messages over the medium

The beauty of electronic mail is that there's no need to change out of your pajamas to check your mail box; as a standard feature of most on-line services, an electronic mail box allows you to look your worst and still exchange messages with other service members with whom you share a common interest. Enjoying the largest membership — over 500,000 users — CompuServe offers an extensive list of user forums, with topics ranging from computer use to music to religion. One of its users, a reporter, was able to get classified information about the Space Shuttle Atlantis's path by connecting with an astronomy special-interest group. CompuServe's amateur astronomers helped the reporter scoop the story while other news sources were being kept in the dark.

Some of GENie's discussion

ROGER JONES



A GUIDE TO GOING ON-LINE

In the chart below, A stands for arts and entertainment listings; D means that public domain software can be downloaded from a bulletin board; E indicates that users can gain access to an encyclopedia, such as Grolier's; F indicates that financial information and assistance — stock quotes and brokerage, for example — are available; G represents a games menu; N stands for news, weather, and sports updates; S means home shopping is offered; and T stands for travel information and assistance — the opportunity to reserve hotels and rental cars, for instance.

	REGISTRATION	FEES*	SERVICES
Boston CitiNet (617) 439-5678	free	free	A G N S
CompuServe (800) 848-8199	\$39.95	\$6-\$12.50/hr	D E F G N S T
Delphi (617) 491-3393	free	Delphi/Boston \$9.95/mnth Delphi/Worldwide \$7.20-\$17.40/hr	D E F G N S T
Dow Jones News/Retrieval (800) 522-3567	\$29.95	\$.21-\$3/min	E F N S T
GENie (800) 638-9636	\$29.95	\$5-\$7.50/hr	E F G N S T
Minitel (914) 694-6266	free	averages \$10/hr (no charge for use of directory)	F G N S T
Prodigy (800) 822-6922	\$49.95	\$9.95/mnth	F G N S T
QuantumLink (800) 392-8200	free	Commodore and PC users \$9.95/mnth Apple users \$6-\$15/hr	D E F G N S T

*Customers are billed in one of two ways: by monthly flat rate or for actual time spent using a given service. In the latter case, a range is given, indicating the difference between non-prime time (usually evening) and prime time (day) prices.

groups focus on medicine, law, and home businesses. Prodigy's electronic-mail service lets subscribers exchange messages, privately or publicly, with users all over the country for the price of a local call, and messages arrive within minutes. Delphi has electronic-mail and conferencing capabilities as well. Minitel, France's widely used information system, is now offered in the US — you can practice your French

on live chat lines and in classified ads. Delphi lets you send electronic mail to a translation service, where it's translated into a foreign language and then forwarded to its destination. Boston CitiNet also has classified ads, special-interest groups (including a VCR troubleshooting hotline and a data bank for those interested in volunteer work), chat groups, and an electronic dating service.

High-tech tabloid

On-line-information services have plenty of news to offer. AP Sports Wire, AP Videotext Wire, Business Wire, and Hollywood Hotline are among CompuServe's offerings. In addition, CompuServe's Executive News Service will search for news stories on designated topics. Quantum, available to Commodore, IBM, and Apple computer users, can

keep you updated on news and sports too, though not to the extent of the above-mentioned services. Accu-weather forecasts are available from most of the services. Minitel offers BBC news.

Where finances are concerned, Prodigy offers on-line discount brokerage, and like several other services, it provides access to Dow Jones News/Retrieval. Prodigy also has an on-line banking service (which, depending on the bank, may cost extra). CompuServe provides banking, brokerage service, mutual-fund analysis, current stock prices, and tax-reform data. GENie and Delphi have 24-hour investment advisers.

Attention all shoppers

You can shop till you drop on your keyboard through many of these services, and buy almost anything — even another computer. CompuServe offers an electronic "mall" that never closes, with over 100 merchants, including Bloomingdale's, Brooks Brothers, and an automobile showroom. Special member discounts are available. (GENie also boasts a mall — only about 32 stores to date, but growing.) Prodigy's mall has on-line ordering from the Spiegel, Sears, and J.C. Penney catalogues, and is currently expanding its grocery-shopping service (coming soon to the Boston area). Prodigy also lets you peruse the pages of Consumer Reports for product information. Compustore, a database available for an annual fee through most of the major services, carries about 250,000 various products at discount prices. Locally, Boston CitiNet lets you shop on-line in a mall featuring area merchants.

Travel assistance and more

Want to know what's going on in the area? Boston CitiNet provides arts and entertainment listings, ski listings, as well as travel and real-estate information. Actually, travel information, including hotel guides and aviation weather reports, is available from most services. The Easy Sabre database, available from CompuServe, Delphi, and Prodigy, lets you check airline schedules, compare fares, and book flights, as well as reserve and confirm hotel rooms and rental cars. If you're traveling to France and want to arrange your own accommodations, interfacing with Minitel through New York's Aline service can put you through to the Paris phone directory. Minitel also lets you make flight reservations. GENie's Adventure Atlas will supply information about a specific type of trip — mountain climbing to scuba diving — you may be interested in.

Information services also make reference works available. The Academic American Encyclopedia is a feature of CompuServe and Quantum; the Grolier Academic Encyclopedia is offered by GENie.

Finally, another feature of most information services is that you can download — that is, transfer to your computer from another — public-domain and shareware software. This enables you to build up a collection of computer programs inexpensively, and if you download during the cheaper, off-peak hours, you'll save even more money. □